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In the absence of guidelines for 'a purely literary study' of the Bible at the secondary school level, this discussion is offered as one English teacher's approach to teaching the Old Testament. Among the unit's major purposes are to increase students' appreciation of the literary and ethical values of the Bible and to acquaint them with material upon which much subsequent literature has been based. Historical backgrounds, themes and motifs (including the characteristic modes of expressing them), and the five divisions of the 39 books of the Old Testament are discussed. Brief lists of references and suggested student research topics are appended. (RD)

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THE BIBLE IS LIVING LITERATURE

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EVER since the New England Association of Teachers of English printed their reading list recommended for college preparatory students in *The English Leaflet* a year ago, listing the Bible and the *Odyssey* as the two books above all others with which students should be familiar, we teachers of secondary school English have been in a quandary. We can find no guide lines for a purely literary study of the Bible at this level, nor does it occur in the course of study of any high school which I have seen. Since the Bible has been thought of primarily as a religious document, the authoritative recording of divine revelation, its doctrinal significance has tended to overshadow its literary value and influence. Hence the poetry, drama, characterization, narration, and even humor of Biblical writing have been largely ignored, while its didactic nature was stressed.

From the days of *The New England Primer* and the McGuffey readers to the present, teachers of English have emphasized the moral as well as the artistic aspects of literature, but we have sedulously avoided sectarian implications. The exposition of the Bible, therefore, being considered almost exclusively the province of the clergy and of parents, has not been brought into the English curriculum of our public schools. We now realize that many high school students have had no contact whatever with the Bible either aesthetically or didactically; hence, they are losing both a great literary heritage and a source of inspiration for moral conduct. Without bringing religion per se into the classrom, many teachers and administrators believe that we should remedy this cultural lack by teaching the Bible as we do other classic literary works.

Knowledge of Greek and Roman mythology is vital for an understanding of much of the art and literature of the world; certainly familiarity with episodes and persons mentioned in the Bible is no less important to our comprehension of the thousands of allusions, names, analogies and the like which occur in literature from the close of the Graeco-Roman era to modern times. To be sure, by using a biographical or Biblical dictionary a student can understand what a columnist meant when he wrote recently, "U Thant, the United Nations Secretary General, was rather a Job's comforter to Ambassador

Goldberg." He can understand the allusion to "the handwriting on the wall" in regard to the Soviet Premier's uncertain future, but he will be much richer if he reads the whole story of Job's suffering and triumph as Isaiah recounts it, or the description of the courage of the exiles in a hostile land in the Books of Daniel and of Esther.

I shall not attempt to set down a day-by-day schedule of reading assignments, quizzes, reports, and essays for a unit on the Bible, but shall present a brief résumé of my discussion of the historical background, basic concepts, literary style and the composition of the Bible, using essentially the sample techniques that I would employ in presenting any major work of literature to my classes. Here my purpose includes increasing their appreciation of both the literary and the ethical aspects of "the world's best seller," and also acquainting them with material on which their understanding of other literary works which they study frequently depends: not only Shakespeare, Milton, and Tennyson, but also later American and English writers, including Thomas Hardy, T. S. Eliot, Herman Melville, Longfellow, Browning, Edna Saint Vincent Millay, Mark Twain, and Alan Paton.

I. Historical Background

The Bible is the epic of a people, recounting their wanderings, wars, exile, and eventual securing of a homeland. The Old Testament shares a number of important characteristics with the other great epics with which students should become familiar through their study of English. In the *Odyssey,* the *Aeneid,* and *The Idylls of the King,* for example, a much deeper significance underlies the series of adventures, the accounts of battles and the struggles to overcome adversity that constitute the obvious "story." In the Old Testament as in these classic epics, we find the glorification of traditional virtues: courage, steadfastness, piety, loyalty to friends, and devotion to particular ideals. Similarly there are confrontations of good and evil, divine interventions, alternations of success and failure. In each a people, or the prototype of a people, not only gain a specific, tangible goal, but also achieve, through the struggle to gain it, at least some measure of wisdom and maturity. Hence, like all great epics, these works can be seen as poetic renderings of the life of mankind, and it is to this, as well as to the purely literary grandeur, that we attribute their great value.

Biblical scholars agree that the Old Testament covers approximately 1500 years: from the birth of Abram (2040 B.C.) to the Rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem in 515 B.C. Actually the last prophet, Malachi, whose work is included in the Old Testament, did not cease his prophetic ministry until 433 B.C., long after the return from the Babylonian exile. The Hebrews were a pastoral, nomadic people who grazed their sheep along the southeastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Abram (later called Abraham) founded the dynasty; he was followed by Isaac, who was followed by Jacob, whose son Joseph was the hero of one of the great success stories of all time. By 1250 B.C., the Hebrews, now often also called Israelites, were led from Egypt, where they had been in bondage under the Pharaohs, by their great leader and lawgiver, Moses. They crossed the Red Sea, stopping at Mount Sinai, where the identity of Yahweh (later Jehovah, the Lord of Hosts, or God) was established as a tribal god demanding moral behavior (The Ten Commandments), wreaking vengeance upon those who disobeyed his precepts, and fighting for and helping out his people in their struggle for existence. The Israelites were not allowed to settle peaceably in the lands promised them by Moses, but were forced to engage in a long and bloody warfare against several tribes, chiefly the Amorites, the Moabites, and the Philistines. This conflict involved more than the desire of the Hebrews to possess the rich lands which they had sought for forty years. Two social systems were in opposition: the Amorite nobles and the landed proprietors, holding thousands of their tribesmen in hopeless serfdom, hated the communal ideas of the Hebrews; the Israelites, on their side, feared and despised the city-dominated social order with its private ownership of land and water and the bitter inequalities which it engendered. As one of the great prophets, Elijah, saw it, the Hebrews were fighting against the evils of luxurious city living, the conscription of farmers and shepherds into military service, mounting taxation, and the decay of the nomadic idea of brotherhood.

Eventually the Israelites triumphed, but instead of resuming their pastoral life, they in turn settled in cities, fortified them, and maintained a standing army to protect them. They also honored their god, Yahweh, who had fought for them against the Amorite god, Baal, and built for him a glorious temple in Jerusalem in which to house his Ark and Covenant. For nearly a hundred years the Hebrew people were a theocracy, lightly

governed by several mighty judges, prophets and priests who "spoke the words of the Lord and did his will." In 1050 B.C. the High Priest, Samuel, because of unrest within and the pressure of new enemies without, chose a young man, Saul, to be anointed king of the lands extending from the village of Dan, near the source of the River Jordan, to Beersheba at the southernmost tip of the Dead Sea. The dynasty, though short-lived (Saul, David, Solomon, Rehoboam), did much to solidify the nation and to enhance its prestige in the world. During the reign of the weak son of Solomon, Rehoboam, however, the kingdom was divided into two states, Israel and Judah, thus losing its autonomy for approximately the next 3000 years. The Hebrews were captured by the Babylonians and sent into exile for fifty years. Although after Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylonia, he allowed the Hebrews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple, they were soon the prey of Egypt and then of Rome. To quote Mary Ellen Chase,* "The Jewish nation as a political unity was at an end, but like a sturdy chip of wood tossed about on a restless stream, which refuses to sink because of its inner buoyancy, the Hebrews have preserved their national religion and have kept their nation intact even while going to and fro upon the earth for centuries."

II. The Themes or Motifs of the Old Testament

The Hebrew nation was a people primarily concerned not with military conquests, but with their relationship to a Divine Power and the consequent ordering of their corporate and individual lives. There are five easily identifiable themes around which most of the Old Testament writing is centered: 1) the idea of a Supreme Being, 2) the nature of man, 3) the understanding of right and wrong, 4) the reasons for the happiness or the suffering in the world, and 5) punishments or rewards after death.

1. When Moses told the story of the creation, he portrayed God as the all-powerful creator whom even the wind and the sea obey. This is an awe-inspiring subject, but one is impressed by the utter simplicity both of the diction and the construction used in its narration: "And God walked in the Garden in the cool of the evening" and the refrain often repeated, "And God saw that it was good." Very few adverbs or adjectives are used

* Mary Ellen Chase, *The Bible and the Common Reader.*

in the narratives; it is as if the narrators purposely wanted the readers (originally listeners, of course) to use their own imaginations. Moses, telling the people of his "walking with God on the mountain," used one adjective only: "And Yahweh said, 'For I, the Lord thy God am a jealous God and visit the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me and show mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments!" This quotation exemplifies another characteristic of Old Testament writing, the use of concrete words rather than abstract ones. Another rhetorical device, poignant questioning, was frequently used to emphasize the omnipresence of God, "Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?" (Ps. 138) and again with an answer, in Ps. 121, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills: from whence cometh my help? My help cometh from the Lord which made heaven and earth."

Shakespearian scholars often declare that if Shakespeare's fame rested upon his sonnets alone, his place as a literary genius would be secure; so according to many Biblical scholars, the heart of the Bible is the Book of Psalms and it could stand alone as a testament to the faith of the Hebrew people. Certainly from a literary standpoint, for beauty and diversity of poetic style, and for sincerity of treatment, the Psalms are unique. These hymns of praise, thanksgiving, mourning and inspiration are a poetic revelation of the religious concepts of the Hebrew nation.

Old Testament poetry depends neither upon rhyme nor metrical rhythm but upon the balanced thought and expression of two portions of one line or of two lines. It is called parallelism, and has four simple patterns: synonymous, synthetic, antithetical, and climactic.

a) Synonymous and parallelism expresses the same thought in two different ways:

A thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday,
And passeth as a watch in the night. (Ps. 90:4)

* * * * * * * *

The heavens declare the glory of God;
And the firmament sheweth his handiwork.
(Ps. 19:1)

b) In synthetic parallelism the second half of the line or the next line supplements the thought by giving the consequence of the first or by an example:

Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord?
Or who shall stand in his holy place?
He that hath clean hands and a pure heart.
(Ps. 24:3, 4)

* * * * * * * *

My heart trusteth in the Lord, and I am helped.
(Ps. 28:7)

c) As the name implies, antithetical parallelism calls for a second line or second half line thought to be in opposition to the first:

Some trust in chariots and some in horses;
But we will remember the name of the Lord our God.
(Ps. 20:7)

* * * * * * * *

The wicked borroweth, and payeth not again
But the righteous sheweth mercy and giveth.
(Ps. 37:21)

d) Climactic parallelism occurs less frequently in the Psalms, but has a powerful effect when used by Isaiah describing the omnipotence of God:

Even the youths shall faint and be weary,
And the young men shall utterly fall;
But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength,
They shall mount up with wings as eagles;
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:30, 31)

2. Revealing the nature of man are the incidents telling of Abraham's obedience to God's command that he sacrifice his only son Isaac; of the boastful young Joseph and his brothers' jealousy; of Naomi's kindly consideration for her foreign daughter-in-law, Ruth; of the enduring friendship of David and Jonathan; of Absalom's treachery against his too-indulgent father. These stories are literary gems; they are simple in form and in vocabulary, but the climax leaves one in no doubt about the unspoken moral of the tale. Repetition of words and phrases, rather than the use of adverbs, emphasizes emotion and stress, as in David's lament, "O Absalom, my son, my son! Would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

3) The Decalogue is probably the most succinct legal writing of all time. It has guided the conduct of innumerable people since it was formulated by Moses after the Hebrews' triumphant

crossing of the Red Sea. There is no equivocation, there are no if's, and's or but's, to mar the stern clarity of the dictates of Yahweh. However, the uncompromising negativism of the "Thou-shalt-not's" of the Ten Commandments is softened by the Psalmist's encouragement to righteous behavior. Psalm 1:1, 2, an example of antithetical parallelism, shows this pleasanter side of virtue:

> Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful;
> But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.
> And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.
> The ungodly are not so; but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away.

Or again, in Psalm 15, David asks the question, "Who shall abide in thy tabernacle?" and answers it by describing a man "who speaketh truth in his heart" and loves his neighbor happily.

Although there is no room for figures of speech in the actual writings of the laws, the didactic psalms and much of the Biblical prophecy and preaching are replete with similes: (He shall be like a tree, the ungodly like chaff; Ps. 1 above); "my enemies, like a lion greedy of his prey" (Ps. 17:12) and metaphors: "Israel is an empty vine" (Hosea 10:1), "Cast thy bread upon the waters" (Ecclesiastes 11:1).

4. Every unusual manifestation of nature—floods, hail, drought, or the descent of a swarm of voracious locusts—was regarded as a punishment sent upon his people by an angry God. Peace in the land, good health, many offspring, and plentiful crops were considered the consequence of righteous conduct. Deserved suffering was understandable, but when evil befell the godly as well as the ungodly, an explanation proved as difficult for the Hebrews then as for us today. Often the prophets declared that God sent suffering to try or to test his people as iron is strengthened by repeated heating. This attitude toward unwarranted tribulation is exemplified by the story of Job. "The Old Testament poem known as the Book of Job is an incomparable literary masterpiece." So writes Miss Chase in her previously quoted *The Bible and the Common Reader.* It

has exalted language, profound thought and characterization, and universality of appeal. The specific subject is the explanation of Job's misfortunes: Why is a just and God-fearing man so punished? Is God just in sending evil upon the earth? How can we reconcile the goodness of God with the pain, evil, and injustice in human life? The obvious relevance of the problems posed by these questions has resulted in countless scholars and critics discussing the book and at least two full-length plays founded upon it have been written. Archibald MacLeish named his version *J.B.* and dealt searchingly with the same ancient problem in a modern environment.

The theme of God's power and man's suffering lends itself to varied poetic flights. The author of the Book of Job (possibly Isaiah) appreciated nature in all her forms, so there is a wealth of figurative language: the wild ass brays, the ox loweth over his fodder; my days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle; my life is wind; as a cloud is consumed and vanisheth away; thou huntest me as a fierce lion; they are stubble before the wind, and chaff that the storm carrieth away; gavest thou the goodly wings to the peacock? or wings and feathers to the ostrich?

5. An integral part of any nation's social history is their belief about death. Sheol, the abode of the dead, was considered similar to the Greeks' Hades, the sad, inevitable end of man, until about the seventh century B.C. In the Book of Job there are frequent references to "the land of darkness, whence I shall not return" (Job: 10:21); "But man dieth and wasteth away; yea, man giveth up the ghost, and where is he? So man lieth down and riseth not; till the heavens be no more, they shall not awake, nor be raised out of their sleep." (Job 14:10, 11). But later in the same book, the thinking must have changed, for Job spoke words that have been a source of comfort to many, "For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth; And though worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God." (Job 19: 25, 26.) It is in the Book of Daniel, however, one of the last to be included in the Old Testament, that the doctrine of a resurrection is stated:

> And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake;
> Some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt,

And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament
And they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever. (Daniel 12:2, 3.)

III. The Composition of the Old Testament

The Bible is a collection of writings. Biblical scholars have fixed upon the year 1000 B.C. as the probable date for the earliest poem committed to parchment, the Song of Deborah (Judges 5). The last contributors were those prophets who wrote after the return from the Babylonian exile and who lived to see the Temple rebuilt in 516 B.C., Joel and Zechariah, Daniel and Malachi. It is evident that many of the books of the old Testament are not in chronological order, but seem to have been placed rather arbitrarily according to their contents.

The thirty-nine books fall into the following five divisions:

a) The Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). These books are ascribed to Moses, and give the story of the creation to the death of Joseph, the exodus from Egypt, the laws and addresses delivered by Moses to the Israelites.

b) The Historical Books (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, First and Second Samuel, First and Second Kings, First and Second Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther). Records of the Israelites in Canaan under Joshua and Samson and thirteen great judges. The history of Saul, Samuel, and David and the story of the exile in Babylon.

c) The Poetical Books (Job, The Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon). The drama of Job's suffering and ultimate justification, the lyrical verses of King David and words of wisdom from Solomon.

d) The Four Great Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel). Prophecies of the restoration of Israel after the Exile and the coming of the Messiah.

e) The Twelve Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi). Warning against sin, and admonitions to turn back to Jehovah. The story of Jonah's ministry and the prophecies of the fall of Nineveh and again of the coming of the Messiah.

In presenting this outline for the secular study of the Bible, I have, of course, simplified the complex and varied mass of material and have selected only a few topics for study. My aim

is, I hope, clear: to give the average student at least some acquaintance with a book which has influenced in so many ways the literature, thinking and history of the Western World.

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The Bible (Authorized King James Version and others).
A Guide to Understanding the Bible, by Harry Emerson Fosdick.
Summary of the Books of the Bible, by G. J. Spurrell and Rev. H. H. Wright, D.D.
The English Versions of the Bible, by Rev. Henry Evans, D.D.
Old Testament Chronology, by Rev. Owen C. Whitehouse, M.A.
Isaiah Speaks, by S. Paul Schilling.
The Scrolls from the Dead Sea, by Edmund Wilson.
The Bible and the Common Reader, by Mary Ellen Chase.
The Greatest English Classic, by Cleland Boyd McAfee, D.D.
The Heritage of Biblical Faith, by J. Philip Hyatt.

Relevant Topics Suggested for Individual Student Research:

The Dead Sea Scrolls.
Different Stories of the Creation (the Greek, Norse, Hindu, for example).
Modern plays with Biblical theme (MacLeish's *J.B.*, Marc Connelly's *Green Pastures*, and early Miracle plays.
The Printing of the Bible in English.

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